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## **Learning Disabled Children**

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### **Introduction**

In this chapter, we focus on the lives of ‘learning disabled children’. Our concern is to explore the ways in which the category of ‘learning disabled child’ is produced and sustained in contemporary social and cultural contexts in England. These contexts include a host of social care, health and educational places as well as community settings. Crucially, we consider the impact of the category on children so labeled, their families and allies. In exploring the category of ‘learning disabled child’, we draw on our research collaborations with children, young people and their families over the past ten years by drawing on findings from the authors’ engagement with three research projects as follows:

*1. Economic and Social Research Council Grant No. RES-000-23-0129).*

*Parents, Professionals and Disabled Babies: Identifying Enabling Care Dan Goodley (University of Sheffield) 2003-2006.*

*This project asked what enabling care might look like for disabled babies and very young children.*

*2. Economic and Social Research Council ( Grant No. RES-062-23-1138). Does every child matter, post Blair? The interconnections of disabled childhoods. 2008-2011 (<http://www.rihsc.mmu.ac.uk/postblairproject/>)*

*This project asked what impact the changes in policy and practice for children in England since 1997 had had on the lives of disabled children and young people.*

*3. Economic and Social Research Big Society? Disabled People with Learning Disabilities and Civil Society, Economic and Social Research Council 2013-2015*

*This project explores how young people and adults with the label of learning disability are faring in the context of economic austerity in England and the extent to which they are participating in civil society.*

To begin, we consider the categories ‘learning disability’ and ‘child’ in turn, before considering how the categories interconnect and intersect with one another. Next we consider the ways in which the category ‘learning disabled child’ impacts on

children's lives drawing on examples from the research projects above and focusing on the practices, systems and sites in which the category is re-produced, including the contexts of health, education, and care. We argue that the concept of 'learning disabled child', despite attempts to shake it off, it is a sticky category that demands us to interrogate its often disabling impacts on the lives of children, their families and allies. Whilst labels are a useful administrative category for accessing services and support we trouble their pathological tendencies. Our analysis is driven by the electric pulse of critical disability studies; an inter-disciplinary community of theory, politics and activism that seeks to understand and trouble the precarious societal position held by disabled people. One key disciplinary approach is that of critical psychological disabilities; where we bring in perspectives such as social constructionism, discourse analysis and psycho-politics to understand the constitution of subjectivity, relationality and personhood as products of a (disabling) world (see Goodley, 2010, for an overview). We conclude that 'learning disabled children' are not passive beings merely acted upon, but rather that they are full of potential and have the capacity to re-shape, re-fashion and re-vise the normative expectations that cloud their lives in ways which impact positively on their lives and, indeed, all children's lives.

### **Learning disability**

From the beginning, we have to acknowledge that, from the latter part of the twentieth century onwards, academics have played a significant part in both producing and sustaining the category 'learning disability'. We agree with Carlson (2010) that the proliferation of the category 'learning disability' has been enabled by a rise in the number of new techniques and technologies that are used to gather information about people. We know too that the production of the category 'learning disability' by the academic community has and continues to provide legitimization of the institutionalization and oppression of disabled people. It is important to recognize, then, that labels are and always have been contentious; while they have been used in enabling ways in children's lives to gain access to services and support, they can simultaneously threaten and limit people's lives (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2014a). In engaging with a discussion of the category of the 'learning disabled child' our aim is not to contribute to the maintenance of what we would see as a potentially oppressive and disabling category, but to trouble, re-shape and revise that category in

order to promote more enabling understandings of the category that will impact positively on the lives of the people who are touched by it.

‘Learning disability’ is only one of a cluster of labels that has been used to refer to ‘lack of intelligence’. Across the globe, the terms ‘mental handicap’, ‘retardation’, ‘intellectual disability’, ‘cognitive impairment’ and ‘developmental delay’ are in widespread use (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2014a). These terms are all premised on individualistic and medicalised understandings of ‘learning disability’ that locate the ‘problem’ within a person ‘with a learning disability’ with the firm belief that the cause of any difficulty is to be found in the realm of bio-medicine (Oliver, 1990). In 1982, Bogdan and Taylor mounted a blistering attack on bio-medical and psychological understandings of learning disability:

Mental retardation (sic) is, in fact, a socio-political not a psychological construction. The myth, perpetuated by a society which refuses to recognise the true nature of its needed social reforms, has successfully camouflaged the politics of diagnosis and incarceration (Bogdan & Taylor, 1982, p. 15.)

Despite this and other concerted attempts to shift understandings and to explore the discursive and socially constructed nature of the concept of ‘learning disability’ (Chappell, 1998; Goodley, 2001; Rapley, 2004) official definitions in England still draw on individual and medicalised approaches. So, for instance, the the *Valuing People* White Paper, a policy document which set out the New Labour government’s strategy for learning disability for the 21st Century (and has been taken up by the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in the UK), still holds on to the following definition:

Learning disability includes the presence of:

- A significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills (impaired intelligence), with:
  - A reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning);
  - Which started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development.
- (Department of Health 2001, p. 14).

No doubt, for some readers of this volume, our claims for a social constructionist account of the category of ‘learning disability’ will simply seem as if we are arguing against common sense. Labels are useful aren’t they? Moreover, learning disabilities are a reality for some children? This response is not surprising; in contemporary global North contexts, people labelled with learning disabilities have been de-

culturised – they are positioned as lacking, alone and as ‘other’ (Goodley, 2001). Learning disability is still widely understood as a ‘naturalised impairment’ (Goodley, 2001) beyond the realm or reach of the social. Contemporary discourses of neuroscience tantalising promise, but have so far failed to deliver, a ‘real’ account of the causes and aetiology of learning disability and yet this is a promise, to which, we, in contemporary global North cultures, remain optimistically attached (Berlant, 2011). Despite this persistent attachment to a naturalised category of learning disability, not all seemingly ‘natural’ categories have been so resistant to a social constructionist critique; indeed, one example of a category that has been shaped by this critique is the category ‘child’.

### **Children & Childhood**

Childhood has also been widely understood as a naturalized category. And yet, more recently, understandings of the concepts of children and childhood as being socially constructed are broadly accepted within the academy in the global North. For example, James and Prout (2001) argue that ‘childhood’ is a social construction that can never be separated from other variables such as class, gender or ethnicity. In 1962, Ariès (1962) published a hugely influential text, *Centuries of Childhood*, in which he argued that, although ‘childhood’ is often presented as a natural phenomenon, ‘childhood’ simply did not exist in the Medieval era as infancy and adulthood were distinguished without an intervening period of childhood being acknowledged. The shifting focus on children as ‘active social agents’ within childhood studies represents a further change in how ‘child’ is re-produced and re-constructed (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014). The impact of the de-construction of the naturalized child and the re-construction of the child as an agent in the social world has been far reaching. In both UK national and international law (HMSO, 1989, UNCRC, 1989), children’s rights have been asserted. And yet, while the idea of the child as a social construction has been largely accepted in relations to class, gender or ethnicity, disability is usually missing from the mix. While norms associated with class, gender and ethnicity are frequently troubled within childhood studies, a continued attachment to notions of ‘normal’ child development means that learning disability remains firmly within the realm of the ‘natural’ (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2014).

### **The ‘learning disabled child’**

From the beginning of a baby’s life (and sometimes before) the “hunt” for learning disability (Baker, 2002:663) is on and, make no mistake, this is an urgent search. The practices of early identification promise rehabilitation and cure, but only if you intervene early enough. Ever increasingly narrow definitions of the ‘normal’ child circulate as the number of labels for children who differ from the ‘norm’ increase including: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD) and Deficits in Attention, Motor Control and Perception (DAMP) among many others (Goodley, 2010).

At the same time, learning disabled people are still characterized as being in some ways ‘childlike’, and as behaving like or having the same cognitive abilities as a child. In England, this childlike status has been reinforced by the introduction of Education, Health and Care plans which chart progress and support needs from birth to 25 (DfE & DoH, 2014). This conflation of ‘learning disabled’ and ‘childlike’ has had devastating consequences on the lives of learning disabled people who are have been denied the right to vote, love, have children, work and to make choices about where they live and who they live with.

Despite attempts, with varying degrees of success, to trouble both the category of the ‘learning disabled’ and ‘child’ outlined above, the ‘learning disabled child’ persists as a naturalized entity in policy and practice in England. For example, recent education and health policy re-iterates the understanding of learning disability as a within-child deficit:

A child of compulsory school age or a young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she:

- has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or
- has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions (DfE & DoH, 2014: 15-16).

So far, we have sought to unsettle in the category ‘learning disabled child’ but we acknowledge that the category persists in policy and practice in England. In what follows, we return to three research projects, drawing on stories from the lives of

‘learning disabled’ children and young people as well as from their families and allies to explore how this sticky and persistent category impacts on every day lives.

### **The research projects**

This chapter draws on the insights gained from three research projects through which we have engaged with the lives of learning disabled children and young people over the last ten years. We describe each of these projects in turn.

#### *1. Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No. RES-000-23-0129). Parents, Professionals and Disabled Babies: Identifying Enabling Care*

The study was undertaken collaboratively by the University of Sheffield, UK and The University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK from 2003-6. The research aimed to identify principles of enabling care from the perspectives of parents of disabled babies and allied professionals and is reported in McLaughlin et al (2008).

- In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 families with babies and young children with special care needs. There was also a strong ethnographic component to the methodology, involving: (i) the observation of mothers, children and professionals in a variety of clinical, social services and social-service and home settings and (ii) immersion within the wider support networks of parents. Finally, focus groups were carried out to include the perspectives of a range of medical and social care professionals working with the families.

#### *2. Economic and Social Research Council (Grant No. RES-062-23-1138). Does every child matter, post Blair? The interconnections of disabled childhoods. 2008-2011 (<http://www.rihsc.mmu.ac.uk/postblairproject/>)*

This project was based at Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK in collaboration with the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. The aim of the project was to understand what it meant to be a disabled child growing up in England. The study was based in the north of England and ran from September 2008 – April 2011. The participants included disabled children aged 4-16, their parents/carers and professionals who work with disabled children, including teachers, third sector workers, health workers and social workers. Data collection included interviews using multi-media methods. The interviews were open-ended and covered a range of issues

including children and young people's experiences of health, social care, education and leisure. A period of ethnography involved attending children's birthday parties, bowling, shopping with families as well as attending impairment-specific leisure activities, including an autism specific social club, parent groups, and user consultation meetings set up by local authorities, services and professionals to access the views of families. Finally, the research also included focus group interviews with professionals ranging from teachers, social workers, speech pathologists, advocates, and leisure providers (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/res-062-23-1138/read>)

3. *Economic and Social Research (Grant No. ES/K004883/1); Big Society? Disabled People with Learning Disabilities and Civil Society, Economic and Social Research Council 2013-2015*

The project runs from June 2013 to June 2015 and is a partnership between four universities (Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Sheffield, the University of Bristol and Northumbria University) working with three partner organizations (Speak Up for Action; the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities and independent living consultants) in the UK. The overall research question asks: how are disabled people with learning disabilities faring in Big Society? The research is being carried out through seven overlapping and interconnected phases including interviews and ethnographic encounters. [More details available at: <http://bigocietydis.wordpress.com/> ]

### **The 'learning disabled child' emerges**

In what follows, we explore the processes and practices in which the 'learning disabled child' emerges. Following our rejection of the category of 'learning disabled child' as 'natural', we explore the encounters, moments, systems and sites in which the 'learning disabled child' is made and ask what impact this has on the child and those around them. We begin at one of the moments when the 'learning disabled child' first appears – the point of diagnosis.

### **Diagnosis**

You know, when you go for an assessment and they ask you all these questions, it was only at that point that I thought, "Oh, okay, that's considered bizarre behaviour". I didn't realise that. (Gayle, mother, Study 2)



Gayle recalls the moment that her son was given his first diagnosis: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). By the age of seven, Simon had been labeled in turn as ‘normal’, ‘naughty’, ‘having ADHD’ and finally as having ‘Asperger Syndrome and dyspraxia’. Gayle described the positive effects of labeling; a label gave her access to Disability Living Allowance (state benefits in England), to a Statement of Special Educational Needs (setting out the extra provision her son would need in school, and to the ADHD nurse (a specialist nurse to support Gayle in managing her son’s behaviour). Clearly, some diagnostic labels can function as powerful markers that provide a passport to services and support. Gill (a mother, Study 1) explained how a label helped her explain her child to her family: “But it’s just the way people are, I think they prefer it when there is a label attached because then they can deal with it a lot easier, I mean, especially the family.” However, the consequences for Simon of the emergence as a ‘learning disabled child’ were far reaching. His feelings of anger became ‘autistic meltdowns’; riding a bike was ‘part of his physiotherapy programme to strengthen his core stability’ and going to bed became part of a ‘structured approach to behaviour management’ (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2010a). It felt as if Simon, the learning disabled child, had become known and could only be known through the diagnostic labels which engulf him. While the ‘learning disabled child’ often emerges at the point of diagnosis, glimpses of ‘difference and disorder’ are often visible before diagnosis in a variety of different cultural contexts and practices. Medical diagnosis in young children often occurs as a process rather than a one off event. For Gayle, diagnosis offered a moment of realization, but this was inevitably preceded by a period assessment in which Simon was measured against the ‘norm’ and found to be an unacceptable distance from it (McLaughlin et al., 2008).

The hunting grounds for difference occupy many and varied terrains in education and in health but sites for children’s play have traditionally presented an open space with an unimpeded view for those in search of the ‘learning disabled child’.

## **Play**

Spaces for play, it seems, afford rich pickings for the practices of assessment and categorization of learning disability, offering potentially rich pickings. Elsewhere (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2010b) we describe the ways in which learning disabled children’s play is characterized as both different and deficient in comparison with their ‘non-disabled’ peers. Play is monitored, surveilled and managed through

the discourses of impairment (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2010b). Play can be ‘good’ (typical) or ‘bad’ (atypical and disordered). And so, flapping your arms or waving your fingers in front of your eyes is a red flag for autism (McGuire, 2011), and parallel play (beyond an ‘appropriate’ age) a sign of ‘developmental delay’. Sarah recalls a painful encounter between her daughter, Chrissie, and a play worker intent on making Chrissie play ‘appropriately’:

The thing that didn’t work was [the playworker] trying to make her do pretend play. No, she is really not interested in giving a drink to the dolly, she has no interest in dollies! NO, NO, this is not, NOT working! (Sarah, Study 2)

As Sarah’s story reveals above, play, for the ‘learning disabled child’, becomes a site for identification and intervention as well as a site of construction of the category. The shift from play to re-habilitation has consequences for the child and those around them. Lynne described the playworker coming to her house and feeling that her abilities were being questioned:

It seemed as if they [the playworker] were coming [to the home] for no reason... they were told to come to somebody’s house and show this family how to play with this [child] and we knew that ... we knew how to show him how to push a car along. You know “come on Robert, let’s play cars” or “let’s play in the sand pit” ...

(Lynne, mother, Study 2)

Once a ‘learning disabled child’ has been identified, both they and their primary carer (usually the mother) are considered to be in deficit and lack and become subjects of surveillance and intervention.

## **Education**

In England, early education is premised on the mantra of ‘learning through play’; in the early years, at least, play is undeniably the child’s work (Brodin, 2005). In failing to play ‘appropriately’ and failing to respond to the urgent interventions of practitioners in the early years, the ‘learning disabled child’ is re-made, yet again, in the context of more formal education. Langness and Levine (1986) remind us of a report from the United States of America in 1970, from the President’s Committee on Mental Retardation (sic) entitled *The six-hour mentally retarded child*. The report describes how a whole host of children were defined as ‘retarded children’ solely between the hours of 9.00am til 4.00pm, five days a week, and yet the naturalized category ‘learning disabled child’ remains intact in schools (see Goodley, 2010).

In England the 'learning disabled child' is not only at significantly higher risk of exclusion than 'non-disabled' peers, but s/he is also constructed as posing a significant threat to the economic progress of the wider community (Runswick-Cole, 2011). Since 1997 successive government's educational policy has called for the assimilation of 'learning disabled children'. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government (DfE, 2011:23) asserts that: '[i]f more effective support of disabled children and children with SEN [special educational needs] prompted greater achievement, it could result in higher productivity gains and growth for the economy, thereby benefiting both the individual and society.' 'Learning disabled children' are, then, characterized as a threat to themselves, their family and to a productive society (Runswick-Cole, 2011).

Schools play a key role in both producing and sustaining the category of 'learning disabled child'. They play their part in the assessment and diagnostic process that identifies children whose lack of achievement, we are told, threatens not only the individual child and the wider society, but they also engage in a host of practices that mark the child as different from their peers as this encounter below reveals:

Kamil wanders around the room not involved in the painting activity, eventually he decides to join in the activity and sits down to take a paintbrush. The teaching assistant takes it out of his hand (there is a minor struggle) and says 'paint finished' and gives him a coloured pencil instead. He loses interest and leaves the table again and begins to wander about the classroom.

(Katherine's ethnographic notes, Study 2)

In wandering round the room, Kamil fails to conform to expected classroom norms.

In response to his non-compliance, he is punished: 'paint finished' and is left to occupy the margins of the classroom, yet again. Parents/carers also described the very public ways in which 'learning disabled children' were physically marked as different in schools:

I'd seen in nursery in that Andrew was dragged by the hand into the hall sat down and it was just like 'the naughty child' really. I felt as a parent I wanted to be in there saying 'don't do that to my child'. You expect that people in educational establishments and with that sort of training wouldn't be doing these kinds of things and again from a parent's perspective, you don't always feel comfortable with going in all the time, because you know you are classified as the parent who is always (Lucy, mother, Study 2).

In our work in schools, we found that 'learning disabled children' were often physically separated from their 'non-disabled peers' in different rooms for lunch, in separate spaces in the playground and in 'special' classrooms or units in their

‘mainstream’ schools. This physical separation was re-inforced with the kinds of practices experienced by Kamil and Andrew alongside discursive repertoires that frame ‘learning disabled children’ as ‘other’ describing ‘them’ as ‘the special needs’, deprived of their status as child (Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009). While we accept the need for schools to be safe places, we see an irony in the unruly acts of practitioners, grabbing arms and hands, being offered as evidence of the child’s difference and disorder (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a).

Learning disabled children are made by and subjected to the (grim) practical realities of schooling (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a). Schools are highly stressful systems: schools are subjected to league tables, teachers to inspection and children to constant assessment and testing (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a). Elsewhere we have described the ways in which such stressful school environments produce systemic violence against ‘learning disabled children’ (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a). Drawing on Žižek’s notion of systemic violence, which views violence as part of the maintenance of the system, the marking and manhandling of ‘learning disabled children’ in schools can be seen as a direct product of the system (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a). It is system that requires regulation, governance and control; it is not surprising, then, that educational professionals ‘do these kinds of things’ and ‘use that kind of language’, because they find themselves acting in such ways to fit the rigidity of the system (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a)

### **Violence and learning disabled children**

Sadly, however, it is the image of ‘learning disabled children’ as a violent threat that is the well-worn cultural trope in the global North. Take for example, two stories from our research:

It’s finding the people [to look after him] that could actually physically cope with my son. Because if he doesn’t co-operate, you have to manhandle him, to get him out of the door and, you know, he’ll be punching you, kicking you (Roberta, mother, Study 2)

My daughter has a good line in hand-biting and hitting people which really upsets the escort on the mini bus. I think at some point, if she actually manages to get the escort, I think he’ll say, ‘I’m not having that child on my bus ever again’. (Shelley, mother, Study 2)

These accounts appear to support the idea that violence and ‘learning disabled children’ are inextricably connected; they are enmeshed to create a pathological whole

(Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a: 602). That the version of the 'learning disabled child' as 'mad' or 'bad' dominates is a testimony to the extensive reaches of a learning disability discourse that perpetuates the myth of naturalized deficit and disorder in children (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a).

However, far from being the pathological perpetrators of violence, we found that 'learning disabled children' were more likely to be the victims of violence, not only in schools, but in their local communities.

She got bullied by girls on the school bus, they pinned her down and were putting tampons in her mouth .... We stuck out on the bus a bit longer and then I thought no, so that's why we give her the lift. (Lesley, mother Study 2)  
Because the thing that we've had with his school now, they don't tell any staff – he's actually been physically assaulted by a lunchtime supervisor and- she thought he'd been bullying her granddaughter, she hit him in the dining hall and said she'd 'bloody kill him' next time. (Gayle, mother, Study 2)

The youth worker called me into her office. She looked dreadful, shocked. Eventually she told me that there had been an incident in the toilet. A group of girls had been teasing Isobel and they tried to get her to lick the toilet seat. There was a rumour that the whole thing had been videoed on a camera phone and posted on You Tube. (Alex, mother, Study 2)  
(Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a: 606)

These accounts confirm that the 'learning disabled child' is often the victim of violence of 'non-disabled' others (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a). When confronted with such stories, we know that there is a temptation to respond to these accounts of violence as the actions of 'a few bad people' (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011a). Our concern is that blaming a few individuals detracts attention from the discursive and cultural conditions that produce environments in which violence against 'learning disabled children' becomes almost a mundane, every day occurrence.

## **Death**

So far, we have argued that almost every aspect of the 'learning disabled child's' life is subjected to scrutiny and surveillance. We have described the ways in which urgent and early intervention is prescribed in 'learning disabled children's' lives to ensure that their development can be as close to the (mythical) norm as possible. We have shown how, in schools, the 'learning disabled child' becomes subject to the pressures of a system that demands certain forms of performance and achievement, and how

failure to live up to these expectations results in violence in schools and in wider communities.

However, there is one area of the 'learning disabled child's' life that has received much less interest or scrutiny and that is death (Runswick-Cole, 2010). In 2002, Todd noted that relatively little is known about the lives of disabled children who are dying. She concluded that this lack of interest unwittingly conveys a sense that the death of a disabled child is in some way less important than other deaths. Parents of disabled children who die young report the discrimination they face as their grief is seen as an illegitimate response to their child's death (Todd, 2002). The death of a 'learning disabled child' is seen by those around them as a release from what is perceived to be the overwhelmingly negative experience of parenting a disabled child (Milo, 1997). The different cultural status of the death of a 'learning disabled child' is revealed in the fact that the sudden and unexpected deaths of 'learning disabled children and young people' often go unreported in the media. Ryan (2014) describes how it took eight months, and a campaign on social media, before the mainstream media reported the death of her son, Connor, a young learning disabled man, who died in the care of the National Health Service in England. Connor, who also had epilepsy, drowned, unsupervised, in the bath; an independent review found his death to be preventable. And yet, Ryan described how, for eight months, she had watched as other young people's sudden and tragic deaths were reported immediately. When an English backpacker on a gap year between school and university dies, the media reports this the next day. The young backpacker is described in reference to an imagined future as, perhaps, a doctor, a lawyer or a teacher. In contrast, the reports of Connor's death made no mention of the life he might have had, leaving Ryan to conclude that there are no imagined futures for young learning disabled people (Ryan, 2014). Characterised as being in deficit and lack and as threatening, rather than contributing to, the future of the economy and social cohesion, 'learning disabled children and young people' experience discrimination, not only in life but in death (Runswick-Cole, 2010).

### **Possibilities for resistance and a politics for change**

While being careful not to deny or de-value the often difficult and painful experiences of the 'learning disabled children' we have worked with, we do also see possibilities for resistance and the potential of a politics for change in 'learning disabled children's' lives. The politicization of the lives of disabled children has gathered

momentum, in part, we hope, through empirical and theoretical work associated within our disciplinary home, critical disability studies (Goodley, 2010). We argue that ‘learning disabled children’ are full of potential – they have potential to subvert, rethink and reject narrow, dull, normative, limiting, disabling, conservative and exclusionary practices in schools, their communities and in wider society (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2014). ‘Learning disabled children’ transgress normal and normative ways of life and demand those allied with them to do the same.

### **Disabled Children and their allies**

The potential for learning disabled children and their allies to transgress the normative in positive and enabling was clearly demonstrated by the children and young people we worked with. We share three examples here to illustrate our findings: queer schools; participation in the arts and circles of support.

### **Crip schools**

Northtown is a co-located special school. Both the head of Northtown and the mainstream school head were keen to co-locate. They both saw this as an opportunity for inclusion but also saw the potential that sharing resources might have for improving provision for both schools. The schools share the sports facilities, canteen, school hall and theatre. The schools share one reception area but the special school is on one half of the building and the mainstream school on the other... There had been concerns that the mainstream pupils would tease or stare at or name call the disabled pupils but this hasn’t happened... The school itself is extremely well appointed with break out areas, interactive whiteboards, sensory room, huge accessible changing/toilet facilities, music, art, science rooms and soft play. The atmosphere in the school was incredibly calm and purposeful with children engaged in a range of practical activities. The art room was stunning and I met the art teacher who the Deputy Head had described as ‘bonkers’ but brilliant. This seemed to be a bit of a theme among the staff. The science teacher was constructing a display that would use lighting to move from day to night and different creatures would emerge throughout the day. This was alongside his construction of a display that glows under UV lights. He uses projectors to display moving pictures of animals and UV paint to bring to life a huge ant... The Deputy Head said that the science teachers visiting from the mainstream school had said ‘why can’t we teach science like this?’ (Ethnographic notes, Study 2).

In exploring these practices elsewhere, (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2010c) we have drawn on the tools of queer and crip theory. We see the ‘bonkers’ teacher as a queer teacher, someone who is prepared to take risks. The queer teacher responds to the queer children in his/her class with an inclusive and creative approach offering opportunities for what McKenzie (2009 cited in Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2012) terms *possability*: the ways in which ‘learning disabled children’ demand imaginative and responsive forms of educational provision. Normative teaching is narrow,

competitive, dull; queer teaching is guided by creative pedagogies, wonder, quirkiness and difference. Queer teaching is a response to queer children ('learning disabled children') that demands more imaginative approaches to teaching and learning for all.

### **Participation in the Arts**

Participation in the arts also offers a space to celebrate wonder, inclusivity and quirkiness. However, where disabled children's participation in the arts has been the focus of research, this has often been limited to an evaluation of the impact of rehabilitation through dramatherapy on learning disabled children's lives (eg: Chesner, 1985). Participation in the arts has been another site of construction of and rehabilitation of the 'learning disabled child'. However, in our work with children and young people, we found examples of performance being used to support the personal and socio-political development of disabled young people. We found that participation in the arts can promote 'learning disabled children's' well-being and their sense of belonging. We found that performance allowed for diverse ways of being, of playing and of learning (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011b).

In our work with Oily Cart Theatre company (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011b), we found that perceptions of 'learning disabled children' were changed through their participants in the arts, as one person commented as she entered the theatre: *'this [performance] shows that they [learning disabled children] matter and that somebody cares and somebody has invested'* (Mother, Study 2). A teacher felt that through engagement with the performance, she would seek to be more playful in her work in the classroom (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011b). Through participation in the arts 'learning disabled children' were able to shake off their sticky label, if only temporarily, and to re-claim their status as childlike and playful without reference to the shadow of the norm (Overboe, 2004).

### **Networks and communities**

We're in transition – that horrible halfway space between children's and adults' services, a no man's land littered with the complex policies and procedures of health, education, and social care.

My son, Henry is 17; he is a much loved and loving; he enjoys pylons, parsnip crisps and chocolate as well as his computer; he has an eclectic taste in music ranging from Aha and Duran Duran to Ellie Goulding. He is great company out on a walk or going to the shops, and, over the years, he has also collected a range of labels including 'having a learning disability'. (Henry's Mum, Study 3)



In a series of blogs (<http://communitycirclesblog.wordpress.com>), Henry's mum (pseudonym) describes bringing together a circle of support around Henry to help her plan for his transition from child to adult services and from school to beyond. In her accounts of the Circle meeting, Henry's mum describes how a group of friends came together to support her and Henry to plan for the future. Her discussion is of Henry's interests and aspirations, activities and past times, hopes and dreams. We know from her first post that Henry has a 'learning disability' but in the subsequent blog posts Henry's label is absent. Symptoms, signs, diagnoses and prognosis are usurped by a focus on participation, aspiration, love and community. Through engagement with others who care for and about him, Henry has been able to remove the label of 'learning disability' and to focus on his hopes, dreams and aspirations.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the category 'learning disabled child' in contemporary social and cultural contexts in England. Drawing on three research projects in which we have worked alongside 'learning disabled children and young people', we have explored the impact of the category on children's lives in their experiences of play, education, violence and death. While our accounts demonstrate the disabling effects of the persistently sticky category of the 'learning disabled child', we have also explored the ways in which children and young people can resist, re-shape and revise the category and demonstrate their potential in schools, participation in the arts and in their communities. We remain optimistic that 'learning disabled children' may be able to peel off their sticky label and become, as Haraldsdottir (2013) says, 'simply children'.

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